

**SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION  
AREA EXAM  
Fall 2017**

**COMMITTEE:**  
Mark Berends (Chair)  
Bill Carbonaro  
Amy Langenkamp

***DAY ONE***

**Part I (Two Hours): REQUIRED QUESTION**

Please answer parts (a) through (c) of the following question:

**Selectivity** is a problem that plagues social scientific efforts to make valid causal inferences about educational outcomes and processes.

- A. Select TWO areas of educational research that illustrate the problem of selectivity bias. Use research in each area to illustrate the fundamental challenge of making valid causal inferences in the sociology of education. Be sure to focus on both theoretical and empirical issues.
- B. Describe at least THREE methodological strategies that researchers have employed to address the problem of selectivity. For each strategy that you identify, select one sociological study that uses this approach to deal with selection bias. Evaluate whether, in your judgment, the author(s) of each paper were successful in dealing the selectivity problem.
- C. Return to part (A) of your essay. Choose ONE of the topics that you selected and design a new study that would make an important substantive contribution to research in that area. Your proposed study may involve new data collection efforts, but *restrict yourself to research designs that are plausible* (e.g., randomly re-assigning children to different families should be off the table!). Explain how the design of your study would allow you to make valid causal inferences, and describe the potential contribution of this research to the field in question.

**Part II (Two Hours)**

Select **THREE** concepts from **LIST A** and **THREE** concepts from **LIST B** below (for **six total**). Be sure to define the concept, discuss its theoretical significance in the sociology of education, how it has been operationalized, and describe key studies and findings that support its relevance to the field.

*Remember, you have 2 hours to write 2-3 solid paragraphs for each of the six concepts you select (that comes out to about 20 minutes per concept).*

**LIST A (Pick THREE)**

1. Locus of control
2. Hidden curriculum
3. Human capital
4. Credentialism
5. Maximally maintained inequality (MMI)

**LIST B (Pick THREE)**

1. Track mobility
2. Oppositional culture
3. Cumulative advantage
4. Nested layers
5. Common school effect

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***DAY TWO***

***Part I (Two Hours):*** Select and answer ONE of the following two questions.

**Question One**

Ability grouping and curricular tracking are controversial practices that are commonly used in American schools. Some scholars and stakeholders favor getting rid of grouping and tracking entirely, while others fiercely resist attempts to implement such a reform and want to see grouping and tracking (in some form) continue.

- A. What is the rationale for grouping and tracking students, based on student ability? Why is grouping and tracking such a controversial practice? Please be sure to present the perspectives of both scholars and stakeholders (parents, teachers, and school administrators) in your response.
- B. What does sociological research tell us about this controversy? Are critics correct when they claim that ability grouping and curricular tracking exacerbate existing inequalities in learning outcomes? Be sure to evaluate the different ***mechanisms*** that scholars have identified as potential drivers of inequality, due to practice of ability grouping and tracking.
- C. Hallinan and Oakes famously debated whether grouping and tracking should be eliminated in America's schools. Hallinan argued that grouping and tracking should be retained, but reformed, so that its negative effects are minimized. Oakes argued that grouping and tracking should be eliminated entirely. What does the evidence tell us about which approach is more likely to reduce inequality in learning outcomes?

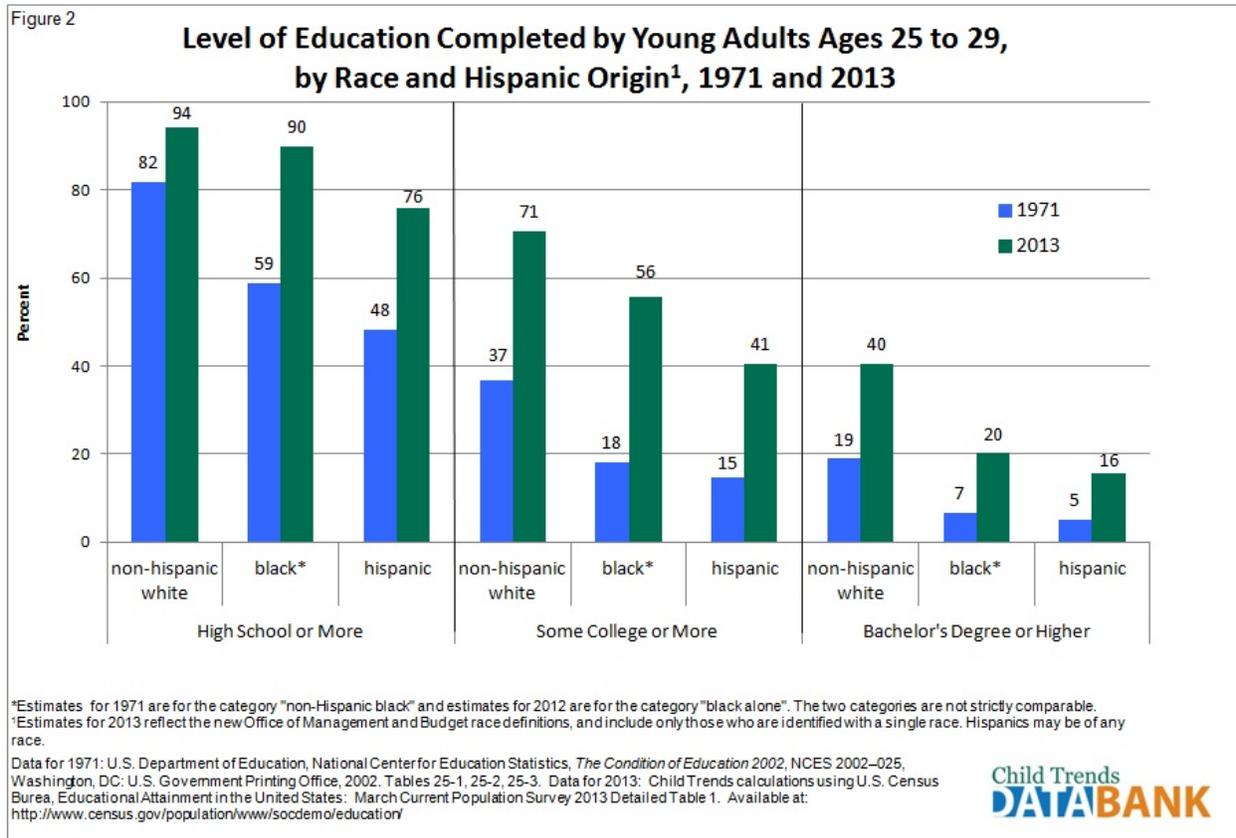
## Question Two

Many people see schools as both the source and remedy of the problem of inequality in achievement outcomes. In contrast, many social scientists are more skeptical that schools play a key role in creating educational inequalities, and are pessimistic that schools can reduce achievement gaps.

- A. Distinguish between “school effects” and the “effects of schooling.” Why is this an important theoretical distinction, and what are the implications for our understanding of educational inequality?
- B. Describe the major contours of research in the area of school effects. What have social scientists learned about the role of schools in creating and/or increasing inequality in achievement outcomes? Be sure to highlight important differences between schools that scholars have studied as potential drivers of inequality in achievement.
- C. Based on the research on school effects, should policy makers look elsewhere to address inequality in achievement outcomes? Explain.

**Part II (Two Hours):** Select and answer ONE of the following two questions.

**Question Three**



The figure above describes describes race-ethnic inequality in educational attainment across two generations.

- A. What does research suggest regarding **why** we see these differences in educational attainment across race-ethnic groups? What factors are driving these differences?
- B. Interestingly, NAEP scores tend to show that Latino-White gaps in achievement are smaller than Black-White gaps. Yet, the figure above shows that Latinos have the worst outcomes at every level of educational attainment. What does research suggest regarding why we see this pattern?
- C. Across the two generations in the figure, we see that each race-ethnic group experienced better outcomes over time at each level of educational attainment. Is this a sign of progress that American society should celebrate, or should we be more pessimistic regarding the significance of this change? Explain.

#### **Question Four**

Gender inequality in post-secondary education has drawn increasing scrutiny by researchers in the last decade.

- A. Describe the overall magnitude and trend in gender inequality in post-secondary education in the U.S. Describe gender inequality in terms of both access and degree attainment. Also, please be sure to describe gender inequality at different levels of the stratified post-secondary system in the U.S.
- B. Describe some of the most prominent theories of gender inequality in post-secondary education that scholars have proposed to explain the patterns described in part A. Based on the evidence, which theory seems to have the strongest support?
- C. What is known regarding gender inequality in students' choices regarding majors and career paths in postsecondary schooling? What theories have been proposed to explain these gender differences, and which theory seems to have strongest empirical support?